

HALTING POINT 3

The "raft" on a sea of clay

Walking along the path at the base of Mount La Verna, we will be surprised to see a great amount of limestone boulders lying among the vegetation: this is "scree", or boulders deriving from landslides, which have always been frequent in this place. The limestone cliff in fact rests on a base of clay of a "plastic" nature, i.e. subject to continuous deformation, whose movements cause the enlargement of some fractures and sometimes the detachment of large boulders. If to this we add that such limestone is subject to continuous erosion caused by the action of water, we can understand how the mountain has ended up taking a pronounced and singular, shape sometimes marked by huge ruined rock faces. The action

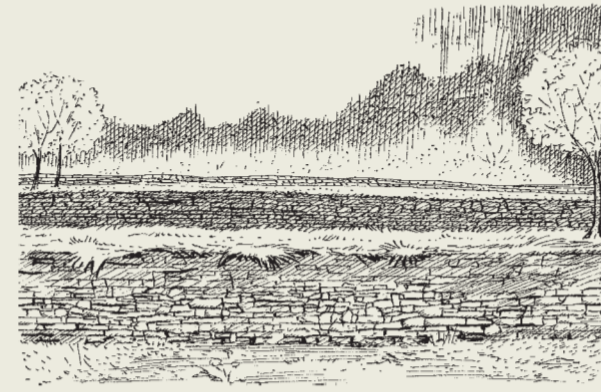
of water also causes that the Mount Penna has, in its interior, interesting natural cavities that are open along major fractures of the rock. Among the four cavities known to date, the largest is the Buca La Verna, which extends for 54 meters, reaching a depth of 36 meters. Some of these are crossed by typical cold air currents, which in the past were used by the monks of the Sanctuary for making "ice", in which they preserved their food within blocks of compressed snow.



HALTING POINT 5

The "kingdom" of brother greengrocer

Plant vegetables which serves the friars, and also greenery that serves for beauty, scented herbs, and leave some strips where our brother the flowers may grow as the wish, as God wishes, thus ordered Francis for his brethren and in this spirit the friars' vegetable and herbs garden (Orto dei Frati) was born. This was a necessary garden also for satisfying the demands of the important pharmacy and of the infirmary of the convent. A deep knowledge was therefore necessary about herbs and of their therapeutic virtues. The botanical exploration of La Verna therefore started in remote times and the *Armarium simplicium* proves it. The Forest of La Verna may be considered as one of the greatest assets which the ecological sensibility and the message of St Francis have left for us. In the Mount we may detect all the naturalistic messages of the "Cantico delle Creature" (The Chant of Creatures) and St Francis's words become the enchantment of a direct and vivifying experience, St Francis understood that in nature everything has a place, all living beings are part of a greater system, where everything has a role and importance. Nature and its fruits, must be picked, paying attention, though, not to destroy forever the generous innovation of "mother earth". This last sentence, transposed into modern language, encourages us to recover the principle of "sustainability of resources", which must be understood, studied and maintained.



HALTING POINT 4

The "sheep-rest" trees

On the left of the path a fabulous specimen of oak greets us: a *Quercus cerris*, it is large tree which has a liking for cool and moist soils. It is recognized for its slender bearing as compared to other oaks and for its acorn dome with "curled" scales.

We can observe how the plant in front of us is a little exceptional when compared to the surrounding ones, much smaller and presumably younger. Try to imagine the possible evolution of this small part of the landscape and listen to the story that the gnarled oak trunk seems to tell us:



...I was a "sheep-rest" tree (albero della meriggia) In those days, I lonesome, commanded the grazing ground and the flocks bleating for an excess of fleece in the heat of dog-days, which found shelter and coolness under my shady branches! All around grassy pastures challenged the dark greenery of the first and the tenuous green of the beeches.

It is a land of saints and artists this where my roots sink, it a land of shepherds and peasants. The Summers of old, had its scents, the only noises were those of the bells ringing, tastes were effused by an ancient wisdom. Winter was frozen, silence. Men had gone far-away and rested inside huts made of turf, lost in a lonely sea-land which marred the air and the heart. We heard in the night, as in the day, repeated litanies wit, arcane significance, pronounced by friars intent in the contemplation of the eternal. 'T was Alvania, a distant light, for those who, from faraway, had this mountain in their heart.

HALTING POINT 6

The ancient road of the "ansilice"

A road that from La Consuma leads to La Verna, flagstones are needed for the steep rise to La Verna, which from the Corsalone river, climbs also to La Verna... year 1767



And here we are at the crossing with another important paved road which leads to La Beccia, the last stage if the ancient mule trail which connected Bibbiena with La Verna, called "ansilice". It is enjoyable to conquer the Sanctuary by its steep course, we get the sense of time slowing down, the fatigue of striding on, but also the enthusiasm and hope which move the wayfarer who sees the goal being reached. The stone-paved route begins at the foot of the mount where in the locality of La Beccia, there is a "hospice", historically destined to host women... Since after sunset no woman may remain within the precincts of the convent.

The hospice was founded in 1612 by the Florentine Company of Benefactors of the Sacred Mount La Verna and extended later in 1637 and 1815. In the early times this road was very busy at every time of the year. What surely gives strength and will to the pilgrim undertaking the ascent, are the splendid views of the Cliffs of the Stigmata, which he sees through the trees flanking the path. The "raw stone" appears in all its imposing might and almost seems to sprout out of the earth's heart, in a strong impetus of tension and praise.

HALTING POINT 7

On the wings of freedom

It was in 1214 when St. Francis, for the first time, reached La Verna. The Sacro Monte had been donated to him the previous year by the Orlando Catani, Count of Chiusi, as a wild and haunting place. Biographies report that, in his climb to La Verna, the Saint was greeted by a multitude of birds, which manifested themselves with their singing God's blessing for the choice of Francis to found a home for his brethren on the mountain. It was no coincidence that birds were to welcome the poor man of Assisi. In fact, in La Verna there is a rich bird life: There have been reported over ninety species of birds, some nesting in the slopes of the mountain or in the surrounding environments. Even the golden eagle, now a firm resident in the Park, who during the winter roams in search for open land, more congenial for hunting, finds its ideal areas around Mount La Verna.

Many scholars are fascinated by the great love that St. Francis showed towards all creatures, a way of reconciliation and respect for nature and its inhabitants.

And it is significant that many campaigns of animal welfare (including the one on the wolf in Italy) have been dedicated to the Saint of Assisi, proclaimed the patron saint of ecology. The poet Dino Campana starting from La Verna saluted the place with the famous passage *I saw from the mystical solitudes a dove taking flight spreading its wings towards the valley's immense open expanse.*



HALTING POINT 9

The monumental Forest of La Verna

Seen from a distance the rock of Verna appears surrounded by a lush forest where dark green firs tower highest. The "ecological forestry" implemented by the monks since the thirteenth century, has always recommended respectful interventions on the great variety of plants, flowers and shrubs. They took from the woods just what was needed, taking care to respect the overall balance, creating the conditions for its renewal. The use by the friars had to be limited to self-consumption and some lumber to be donated to the poor of the area. What modern foresters call "cutting drinker" was implemented with the removal of only a few plants chosen among the larger, rather than many of medium size. The current appearance is that of a beautiful mixed woodland, with a prevalence of beech, with very large specimens; many trees are white fir, while in rich undergrowth are also found yews and hollies. The western and northern cliffs of the mountain and the landslides below are colonized by beautiful formations of deciduous plants that here often take very curious twisted forms, as if almost lending their strength to the stability of the rock. The less impervious areas are clothed by a beautiful forests of beech, maple (curly maple, field and mountain maples), then ash, mountain elm, lime and giant isolated wild specimens of white spruce.



HALTING POINT 8

The Sanctuary of La Verna

A doorway surmounted by a Romanesque arch with the words "Non est in toto sanctor orbe mons- No other mount is holiest in the world", introduces us to the Sanctuary. St. Francis stayed in this place on several occasions from 1214 until the time he received his Stigmata in 1224. Upon arrival within the portal, we are immediately struck by a paved square, which opens over an extraordinary view of the valley of Casentino. The square is called the "Dial" for the presence of a sundial placed on the wall of a bell-tower. The most important church is represented by the basilica, whose construction began in 1348 and was completed, in its final state, only in 1509, thanks to the contribution of the Consuls of the Wool Traders Guild of Florence. Inside the Basilica is preserved one of the largest organs in Europe, with over 6,000 pipes! The suggestion and the spirituality of La Verna are best appreciated by visiting the places of life and prayer of the Saint: the Sasso Spicco, (Split Rock), a deeply cleft rock, a privileged place of meditation, the bed, today a humble stone, the Chapel of the stigmata, the Precipice and all the other treasures that make up the Sanctuary. In this atmosphere of profound mysticism and recollection, the masterly art of the Della Robbia has been inserted admirably. The artist has in fact left at La Verna, the highest achievements of his art, creating glazed terracotta works known and appreciated all over the world.



HALTING POINT 10

Francesco and Frà Ginepro's mountain flora

Reading the "Chant of Creatures" (Cantico delle Creature) we can see how St Francis, with his mystical intuition came to the same conclusion as modern ecology; this is that ion nature all is useful. The sun, the moon, the stars, cloudy or sunny weather, field flowers. Everything, absolutely everything. It is certainly surprising that both St Francis and scientists, in different ways, come to the same conclusions... Fr. Ginepro 1982

Among the many disciples of Francis there was one who became a naturalist. Brother Juniper, in fact, was a botanist and a zoologist, but also a good wildlife photographer. He died a few years ago, leaving a legacy of images of the most precious gems of Mount La Verna: flowers. St Francis's Mount undoubtedly



boasts the richest flora landscape of the whole park. The over 400 recorded species are distributed in the dense and lush forest of monumental beech is the Silver Spruce, in mixed forests of oak and hornbeam on the warm slopes, and tin he cliffs and the numerous karst cavities. From this point begins a path leading to Mount Penna and is an invitation to discover its fine flowers: the hundreds of species begin to bloom in March, with rare *Crocus biflorus* and hellebores and ends in October with the autumn cyclamen *Cycalmen hederifolium*. Crossing these environments and listen the woodpeckers and titmice, jays and hawks, while trying to respect nature here and everywhere.